

SYMMETRY, ASYMMETRY BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Fields of interest: Theory of translation, comparative cultures.

Publications:

Honyakugo seiritsu jijyo, [The History of Translating Words in Modern Japan, in Japanese], Tokyo: Iwanami, 1982; *Hi no siso*, [The Thought of the Secret, in Japanese], Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 2002.

Abstract: *The translation of languages is achieved on an assumption that the meaning expressed either language can be equal. Then we could say that this equality is the symmetry of the meaning of languages. On the other hand, in Japan, people have often used Chinese characters for translating words, which meaning they could not always understand well, but studied these words by heart, as if they have left the meaning in the words because the words derived from advanced civilization.*

They could not understand the meaning well, therefore they felt the word might have some profound meaning unknown in it. I call this effect of the translating word "cassette effect". A cassette means a jewelry box by origin, which is beautiful apparently, and so makes people feel to be something splendid inside, although there may be nothing inside. The translation by means of this effect is asymmetrical between the original language and the translating one.

The method based on "cassette effect" may be useful for intercultural understanding today, when it may be important that people can deliver or receive foreign things as they are left not understood well.

1 SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY OF TRANSLATION

The translation of language is achieved on the assumption that the meaning expressed by either language can be equal. For example, the meaning of a word "society" in English is equal to that of "société" in French. Then we could say that this equality is the symmetry of the meaning of languages.

There have been critics on the possibility of translation; on the whole, however, the symmetry principle of the meaning between languages has been regarded as the necessary condition for translation.

The translation in Japan, however, has been fairly different from this symmetry principle. Japan has been in her long history very eager for translation among other civilized countries in the world. About one thousand and a few hundreds years ago, she accepted the advanced Chinese civilization and used Chinese characters for translating Chinese language. And then, when Japanese accepted Western civilizations in modern era, they also used Chinese characters for translating Western languages. That is, they coined new words by means of Chinese characters composing some characters for a translating word; for example, *sha* [Chinese character in its origin] and *kai* [Chinese character in its origin] composed a newly coined word *sha-kai*.

When a Japanese translator coined a new translating word, he gave it a definition same as its original word. It could mean, however, only a part of the concept of the original word; moreover, this new word would soon be seen by many common readers who could not understand well its meaning at once. Therefore, these new coined translating words in modern Japan have been the insufficient words to understand their meanings. Such insufficiency of meaning is, however, difficult to be perceived by many people, because a language is made up as a closed structure in which there should not be insufficient meaning words, and the image of this structure is input in human brain; so people usually think that there should not be a word which meaning is insufficient. Therefore, the new coinage has made a sort of double structure of Japanese language, that is, the word has sufficient meaning in appearance, for example, a translating coined Japanese word *sha-kai* should have the equal meaning to its original word, "society"; on the other hand, as a matter of fact, it has little meaning. That is to say, symmetry principle is in appearance, and asymmetry in reality.

2 "CASSETTE EFFECT", JAPANESE TRANSLATING METHOD

2.1 Cassette effect

I call this function of the newly coined word "cassette effect", which seems to have enough meaning in appearance, and in reality, its meaning is insufficient or empty. A cassette means a little jewelry box by origin, which is beautiful apparently and makes you feel to be something splendid inside, but because it is only a box; I mean, it may have nothing in it.

By the cassette effect, not understanding the meaning, people are charmed to the word, imagining that though knowing well, there might be sufficient splendid meaning in it. To tell the truth, we must say here, not "but", but "therefore", i.e., not understanding the meaning, *therefore* people are charmed to the word. The cassette effect of a word

appears, in general, when someone meets a new coined word, or he or she is learning a difficult word for the first time. This effect can be seen, above all, in modern Japan where lots of translating words have been coined.

2.2 The history of translation in Japan

Japan has, almost since her founding, built the translating culture. Buddhism once came into being in India and was soon exported into China, where the sutras were translated in Chinese characters. Japan introduced Buddhism in about 6th century, and then, they accepted the sutras almost as they were. That is, Japanese read these Chinese characters by means of Japanese pronunciation, while the form of characters were read as they were; as a result, people could read the characters but could not understand their meanings well. Many Japanese common Buddhists have visited the temple and heard the sutras read by bonzes. However, almost the entire Buddhists populace could not understand these; *therefore* they have felt the chanted sutras graceful. And so, the cassette effect of the words of sutras was working. This was, so to speak, the typical way of Japanese style translation, which has been succeeded since.

At about the same time when Buddhism came, Confucianism was introduced also from China. Japanese read the Confucian text by Japanese method *kundoku*, that is, to read the original sentence changing its word order through Japanese style, and supplying some Japanese words. Afterwards, Chinese characters read by this method came into Japanese language, which were mainly used by the ruling class; and then, these imported characters made a sort of another Japanese language, while traditional ordinary Japanese language was used among many common people. Since then, this double structure of Japanese language, which is composed of high-grade style mainly used for translation and common one, has been succeeded till today.

Before modern era in Japan, this high-grade style language has been taught at schools, where students mainly studied Confucian texts. The method of the study was said *sodoku* which means “simple reading”, that is, the teacher read the text by means of *kundoku*, and then students read it many times in the same way. In the classroom, students could not be permitted to question the meaning to the teacher. Students only read earnestly in the same way many times as the teacher had read. Thus, students had obliged to accept the Confucian terms as they didn’t understand their meanings well. Cassette effect has been brought up in this way. Not knowing the meaning of a foreign writing well, one can render it into Japanese; the tradition of “cassette effect” is still alive now.

3 THE POSSIBILITY OF “CASSETTE EFFECT” AS THE METHOD

Generally speaking, it is natural that we cannot comprehend well the meaning of a foreign language at once. Not comprehend well; however, human has accepted foreign

languages everywhere in the world. People, who have encountered a foreign language for the first time, not received it after comprehend it, but must have received it at first and then understand it little by little.

Although “simple reading” as the learning method has been the unique Japanese way, people might have performed the similar way of receiving foreign languages everywhere in the world. Moreover, the structure of a language is, on the whole, the basic structure of a culture. The “cassette effect” by means of the “simple reading” method for foreign languages ought to have fostered the understanding way for foreign cultures in Japan. Thinking in the same way, this method would be useful for mutual intercourse between different cultures in the world.

As I said above, the translation between different languages has been achieved on the assumption of the symmetry principle of meanings, which has made people work translating foreign languages. In the same way, people usually have associated with different cultures on the assumption that a culture could propagate into other cultures as the same form and the same contents. Thus, the method of science, the system of democracy, human rights concepts, and even works in the fields of arts or entertainments have been spread over the world in the same way, in which especially people in the advanced cultures have believed.

This has been, however, an assumption, and not always the fact. To tell the truth, people have occasionally translated and read foreign languages by means of some asymmetrical methods like “cassette effect”. The same is true of foreign cultures. The symmetry principle is surely important as the model for the association of cultures in the world; and it is also important to recognize the different effect being influenced by the advanced model.

Generally speaking, the thinking way that whether people can comprehend perfectly foreign cultures or “clash of civilizations” occurs may have derived from that of symmetry principle. There may be another way of mutual intercourse between cultures, namely, some asymmetrical way by “cassette effect” method.

References

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APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL PAPERS OF THE SYDNEY CONGRESS, 2001

The papers of the Sydney Congress, 2001, were published in a double special issue of this journal (*Symmetry: Art and Science*, 2001/1-2). This appendix presents those papers that were received too late and not included there.